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ABSTRACT

Sixty undergraduate women interacted in dyads with female experimental confederates in a study of the interactive effects of social attributions and environmental controllability on interpersonal assertion. The environment was systematically varied on two dimensions of social power or control: (1) social responsiveness of the confederate, and (2) control over visual information in the interaction. As predicted, there was a significant interaction between listener responsiveness and preexisting attributions made by the speaker. Compared with their baseline voice quality during neutral messages, subjects with low self-perceived social power interacting with unresponsive confederates showed low voice assertion (content-filtered speech) during affective messages. No significant "visual access" effects were found. (Author/RL)

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Environmental controllability and social attributions:

Codeterminants of unassertive communication patterns

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A series of past investigations have explored the relationships between controllability of the social environment, social attributions and nonverbal assertion (Bugental, Caporael & Shennum, 1980; Bugental & Love, 1975; Bugental and Shennum, 1980; Shennum & Bugental, 1977). In adult-child interaction, we have found that "difficult" children induce an unassertive speech pattern in adults--but only in adults with initially low perceptions of their own control capabilities (Bugental, Caporael & Shennum, 1980). In the present investigation, we attempted to establish the transcontextual validity of our earlier findings by demonstrating the same relationship in adult-adult interaction by using a different attributional measure, and by introducing a different type of interaction difficulty.

In our original research, we established a relationship between the presence of a "disturbed" child in a family and a unique speech pattern demonstrated by the mother (Bugental & Love, 1975). Mothers of such children were found to be less assertive vocally (voice intonation measured in content-filtered speech) when making approving or disapproving statements than when making neutral comments or giving minor directives. Mothers of well-functioning children, on the other hand, demonstrated the opposite pattern, i.e., their most assertive voice intonation accompanied their statements of approval

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or disapproval. Since this early research, we have gone on to show that child characteristics (unresponsiveness, uncontrollability) can induce the observed "weak speech" pattern--but only in mothers who were originally "external" in their locus of control. We have demonstrated the moderator function of maternal attributions with reference to both naturally-occurring (Shennum & Bugental, 1977) and experimentally-induced child uncontrollability (Bugental, Caporael, Shennum, 1980). In the latter study, children were trained to act either in a responsive, controllable fashion or an unresponsive, uncontrollable fashion in interaction with unfamiliar adults.

The present investigation extends our adult-child research to the dynamics of interaction patterns in adult peer relationships. In a pilot investigation, we have discovered that adult strangers interacting under rather tense circumstances are more likely to produce a "weak speech" pattern if they have an external locus of control (Bugental & Shennum, 1980). In the present study, we hoped to establish the causal role of listener unresponsiveness in producing "weak speech" in individuals with initially low perceptions of social control. For this reason, experimental confederates were trained to behave responsively or unresponsively in listener roles. And it was again predicted that the "weak speech" pattern would be elicited as an interactive function of the social unresponsiveness of the listener and the social attributions of the subject.

In order to determine the extent to which unassertive speech patterns occur in response to other types of reduced environmental control, a second manipulation was introduced. We systematically varied the extent to which subjects had access to visual information in the interaction (subjects were either blindfolded, asked to hold one hand over their eyes or were sighted). This second manipulation was suggested by research on the effect of uncon-

trollable noise (Singer). Women have been found to report increasing frustration with decreasing amounts of visual information in interpersonal interaction (Argyle, Lalljee & Cook, 1968). Correspondingly, it was assumed here that a significant decrease in perceived control would be produced by reduced access to visual information--in particular when access was prevented externally by a blindfold.

Subjects

Subjects were 60 female undergraduates fulfilling a psychology course requirement.

Experimental Confederates

Two female undergraduates were trained as experimental confederates. In practice sessions, they were trained to enact conversationally responsive and unresponsive behavior. Responsive behavior included giving moderate length answers to questions, giving listener responses ("uh huh's," etc.) during conversation initiated by the other person, responding immediately to the other persons's comments, and by asking follow-up questions in response to the other persons's comments. Unresponsive behavior consisted of giving very brief answers to questions, giving few listener responses, being slow in responding to the other person, and by failing to ask follow-up questions of the other person. Confederates were trained to be equally pleasant (friendly verbal content, smiles, pleasant voices) during responsive and unresponsive enactments.

Experimental Procedure

Experimental subjects were recruited for a "two-part" study. They initially completed and returned an attribution measure (test returned to a different location) before engaging in the interaction portion of the experiment.

The attribution measure administered to subjects is a pilot instrument intended to measure the perceived causes of social and academic success and failure. Only portions of the instrument were used for this study. Specifically, we utilized subject ratings of the perceived importance of ability versus circumstance for social success (attributions found to predict communication behavior in our past research; Bugental & Shennum, 1980).

During the interaction portion of the study, subjects spent two minutes interacting with one of the experimental confederates. The study was initially explained to them as concerned with the impressions formed of others in different types of communication settings (e.g., on the telephone as opposed to in person). They were told that they would be interacting with another undergraduate and that they should try to find out something about the other person's feelings about school. They were also told that they would be asked some questions about the other person after the interaction. Subjects in the "no visual access" condition were blindfolded before they were taken to the observation room. Subjects in the "reduced visual access" condition were asked to hold a hand over their eyes before entering the observation room (and to keep it over their eyes during the interaction). "Full visual access" subjects were simply taken to the observation room. The subjects and the experimental confederate were introduced to each other and were left alone to interact for two minutes in a small observation room. During this time period their interaction was videotaped. The microphone was not visible and the camera was behind an unobtrusive portion of mirror (the mirror was covered with a variety of brightly-colored, reflecting surfaces).

After the interaction, subjects rated the confederates' attitude to school and their perceived attitudinal similarity to the confederate; they also rated how difficult it was to talk to the confederate and how self-assured they themselves felt in the interaction. Conversational ease was used

as a used as a manipulation check on the experimental inductions. Ratings on this variable were compared in an analyses of variance that included three grouping variables (visual access, listener responsiveness and confederate*), and one repeated measure (voice assertion with positive content versus voice assertion with neutral content). A significant "perceived conversational ease" main effect was found for listener responsiveness ($F = 79.82$; $df = 1,49$; $p < .001$); subjects reported that it was easier to talk to responsive listeners. No other significant effects were found.

Significant main effects for responsiveness were also found for the other three ratings: Responsive listeners were seen as more positive to school ($F = 7.36$; $df = 1,49$; $p = .01$) and more similar to the respondent ($f = 7.61$; $df = 1,49$; $p = .01$); the respondent also reported feeling more self-assured with the responsive listener ($F = 9.12$; $df = 1,49$; $p = 0.1$). No significant effects were found for "visual access" on any dimension. This suggests that this second dimension was not a meaningful manipulation in terms of subject perception of the situation.

Communication Analysis

Audio messages were selected from each subject's conversation. Messages were selected to include content that included only the voice of the subject, that was at least three words in length, and that could be understood well enough to be transcribed. A message was considered to be ended when the confederate spoke, or when the subject shifted topic or affect. Messages selected were copied onto an edited tape. Messages for any given subject were introduced by the subject's identification number. Placing together messages for any given speaker was seen as maximizing within-subject effects. This

*Which of the two confederates they interacted with.

procedure differed from our past studies; in all our past investigation, messages were taped in random order.

Four undergraduate female raters made independent judgments regarding the assertiveness and affect of the verbal content and voice intonation of all messages. Raters were trained according to our usual procedures (e.g., Bugental, Caporael & Shennum, 1980). Training included discussion by the experimenters of different components of communication, examples of the types of messages they would be hearing (drawn from the present study), examples of messages representing different scale points on the two dimensions to be rated (exemplar messages drawn from past research), and practice in rating sample messages (including inter-judge comparison of their ratings).

Voice interaction was judged by having raters listen to messages routed through a band-pass filter. Content intelligibility was virtually eliminated by filtering out frequencies above 1,000 Herz; frequencies below 100 Herz were eliminated to reduce background noise. Verbal content was judged by having raters read typescripts of messages (messages were typed onto separate cards).

Assertiveness of messages was rated on a seven-point scale from strong, assertive to weak, unassertive. Message affect was rated on a seven-point scale from pleasant, friendly to unpleasant, unfriendly. The dependent variable of interest here was assertiveness of voice intonation during affective verbal content. Specifically, we were interested in measuring the extent of the individual's vocal assertion shift during affective content as opposed to their voice assertion during their baseline, neutral content messages. As there were too few negative content messages to be useful, our dependent variable was limited to assertion shift during pleasant content:

$$\text{Vocal Assertion Shift} = \bar{X}_A - \bar{X}_B$$

Where A = voice assertion during pleasant content

B = voice assertion during neutral content

Results and Discussion

A regression analysis was performed on vocal assertion shift data (elevation of voice assertion during affective content). The analysis included listener responsiveness (LR), visual access (VA), confederate (C), social attributions (SA), VA x LR interaction, VA x SA interaction, LR x SA interaction, and VA x LR x SA interaction. Our central hypothesis is tested by the interaction between listener responsiveness and social attributions of subjects. All variables accounted for 39% of the variance in explaining vocal assertion shifts, but only two independent variables (LR, and LR x SA interaction) produced significant effects. Responsive listeners induced more positive vocal assertion shifts than did unresponsive listeners ($p = .04$), and as predicted, there was an LR x SA interaction ($p = .05$). Specifically, there was a stronger relationship between voice assertion and attributions with unresponsive listeners than with responsive listeners. When subjects interacted with unresponsive listeners, voice quality (during pleasant content) was increasingly weaker, the lower the subject's self-perceived control.

We have demonstrated here that social attributions act to moderate the effects of listener responsiveness on speaker assertion patterns. Only individuals with relatively low perceived control over social success are adversely affected by an unresponsive listener. Such individuals fail to show the "usual" increase in vocal assertion when making positive affective statements. They are, in fact, more assertive when making statements like, "I'm a psychology major" than they are when making statements like, "I really liked that course." This pattern is the same as that which we have observed for different subjects and within different settings.

It appears that individuals with low self-perceived ability to control their social environment may be particularly affected by interactants who

provide an unmanageable social environment. When the other person is slow to respond or fails to give cues that they are listening or to encourage further conversation, "low power" individuals alter their communication style. They still make friendly statements but without the apparent conviction that would normally be expected. Their socially most important statements--in terms of encouraging or maintaining interpersonal relationships--can jhus be seen as potentially unconvincing or attention-inducing. We have not as yet established the effects of the observed communication pattern, so our assumptions concerning its ineffectiveness are as yet speculative. We are exploring the possibility in ongoing research that weakly-voiced positive content is a maladaptive communication pattern.